



Lake Huron Citizens Fishery Advisory Committee

Established by the Department of Natural Resources to improve and maintain fishery resources of
Lake Huron through better communication and partnership.

Lake Huron Citizens Fishery Advisory Committee Meeting Minutes

In-Person Meeting Only

Tuesday April 25, 2023

10:30 am 3:00 pm

Jay's Sporting Goods in Clare

Approved

Attendance:

Committee: Frank Krist, Randy Terrian, Bryan Darland, Jim Johnson, Judy Ogden, Tom Andris, Paul Nienaltowski, Tom Frontjes, Blaise Pewinski, Tom Keerl, Mike Veine, Laura Ogar, Jim De Clerck, Gene Kirvan, Gary Decker, Leo Mrozinski DNR: Randy Claramunt, David Cozad, Ben Rook, Matt Klungle, Tim Cwalinski, Jeff Jolley, April Simmons, Dave Fielder, Jason Gostiaux, Ed Eisch, Jeremiah Blaauw, Amber Frye.

Welcome and Introductions (Frank Krist; Randy Claramunt, DNR Fisheries Chief and Randy Terrian, Vice-Chair).

Frank thanked Jays Sporting Goods for providing the meeting room, furnishing logistical support, and setting up the Outback Room, which is very much appreciated. Frank also thanked Amber Frye for the challenging job of recording the minutes.

Randy Claramunt's overview as Lake Huron Basin Coordinator.

Randy Claramunt has left the role as Basin Coordinator for Lake Huron and has accepted the position as Chief of Fisheries Division. **Randy Terrian** spoke on behalf of the **group acknowledging Randy Claramunt and the history of his contributions to the Lake Huron fishery** and he was presented with a plaque from the Lake Huron Citizen Fisheries Advisory Committee. There were several comments stressing Randy's patience, and willingness to explore new ideas. Frank stressed that the Committee and Randy C did not always agree on certain proposals or directions, but Randy always was willing to respectfully discuss all points and when a consensus was reached, we all worked hard to educate the public, gather input, gain support, and undertake a project.

Randy Claramunt expressed his appreciation of the partnership with this Committee and reminded the group that much more can be accomplished by **working together** and he valued the opportunity to exchange ideas with the Advisors and other participants. By sharing information at this level, many new programs have been established and other directions are being pursued. Advisory Committees are extremely valuable for assisting the DNR in making credible decisions. Randy emphasized the importance of trust which is a two-way street between the managers and the users of the resources.

Randy has the major goal of educating the public, legislature, executive office, and other officials of the importance of the state's Great Lakes and inland fisheries. Michigan has an incredible number of fisheries resources, yet the Fisheries Division's capabilities and staff have been declining steadily for several decades. This has been occurring despite the huge economic potential these resources can bring to the state. Angler fee increases are not working and to be more successful a new method of funding fisheries is needed like many other states have undertaken. Randy asked us all to work with him to accomplish these goals. The Advisors and other participants expressed their disappointment in losing Randy as a Basin Coordinator but are looking forward to working with him as Fisheries Chief.

Update on the progress of the opening of the Lower Saginaw River year-round this spring. (Dr Jeff Jolley, DNR Southern Lake Huron Unit Manager; Dr. Dave Fielder, Research Biologist and Modeler; Jason Gostiaux, DNR Fishery Biologist and April Simmons, DNR Fishery Biologist).

Jeff Jolley provided an update on **opening the Lower Saginaw River** to walleye fishing the entire year. Overall, it has been a challenging spring for anglers due to the weather, runoff, and river conditions. While still fishable, most anglers are reporting low catches on Saginaw River while anglers on Saginaw Bay have had much success. Although this was a new opportunity for walleye anglers, there was not much action, and each year will be different. Weather and river conditions also affected a local walleye tournament. Another item impacting participation, was that anglers were traveling to the Detroit River, to pursue walleye when Saginaw River conditions were not favorable.

Jaw tagging for walleye was completed although again because of weather conditions, the task took a little longer than normal. Walleye were tagged this year on the Flint, Kawkawlin, and Tittabawassee rivers. Jeff fielded comments and concerns regarding this tagging.

Dave Fielder hypothesizes that fishing will be more successful after spawning, not just as they enter the river when the mature fish are more interested in spawning than feeding. We will be interested in looking at **harvest rates** of males vs females and when the fish are most vulnerable in the Lower River.

Comments were made in response to who is benefiting from the economic impact of this expanded fishery and how they are contributing to support the fishery. **Randy Claramunt** responded explaining **what a fishing license pays for** including all fishery management plus commercial fishing administration, habitat restoration, Consent Decree negotiations, safe boating, non-game fish species, etc. Collectively, the DNR has the largest budget it has had in years, \$580 million. Of this, the Fisheries Division received only \$29 million. From the General Fund, the Fisheries Division receives almost no money, which means there are essentially no general tax dollars going toward funding the resource. Many local positive economic impacts are generated from fishing activities yet the non-anglers that receive these benefits mostly do not share in fostering the resource which contributes to the brokenness of the existing funding model. How do we approach this differently? Other states have modeled ways to assure that those who want to use the resource are funding it. Collectively we need to change this.

Jim Johnson – There are multiple ways that communities can contribute to fisheries programs and recreational areas. Jim mentioned a **funding method** implemented 15 years ago by other states providing a certain amount of funding for each acre of surface water in their state. Michigan staffing is so low that the number of staff hours per acre of water would not even be detectable on a chart. By far, Michigan is the lowest of all states when comparing funds in relation to the number of resources Michigan manages. This information should be utilized to educate the public. Since anglers are already paying, the other users need to start paying for their additional benefits and uses of the water resources. For example as Randy C noted, anglers should not be paying for administration of the commercial fishery and coping with invasive species. These issues should be funded through the General Fund.

Randy Claramunt – A challenge to changing the funding structure is **that our voice has gotten so small** that we can't advocate for our resource in a room full of bigger voices and other agencies.

Brief update on the progress of fish stocking in Lake Huron this season and the status of the fish being stocked. (Ed Eisch Fish Production Program Manager).

Ed Eisch -- **Fish stocking for Lake Huron** has some challenges to stock at preferred times, mostly due to limited staff, but mainly we are still hitting the acceptable periods. Ed provided a brief update of fish stocking efforts that have been completed from each of the state hatcheries. Those that have not been stocked will be stocked the following week. He also provided an update on spring **steelhead egg take** and how that evolved with the unexpected challenges caused by the warmer weather and determining the best time to complete the egg harvest. Because of some uncertainty additional eggs were taken. The

Musky egg collection will happen in May at Detroit.

A discussion about the possibility of **night stocking** took place. Concerns from DNR staff included safety of staff driving trucks, having secondary vehicles readily available in the event of a breakdown, and the general lack of benefits compared to daylight stocking. Stocking rates are developed at a level which accounts for some loss due to predation. The obvious benefit of night stocking is the potential reduction of avian predation on stocked fish from sea gulls, terns, cormorants which are very visible preying on stocked fish that hang around near the planting site before moving out into the system. However, since some newly stocked fish are often present several days near the site, stocking day or night would make little difference. What is not evident is most of the stocked fish lost are consumed by fish predators such as walleye and lake trout. Timing is the biggest advantage we have by relying on the smolts' natural inclination to quickly migrate offshore. Currently, there is no significant evidence to support utilizing nighttime stocking. **Appreciation** was expressed for the hatchery and driving staff for overcoming these many serious challenges and the public volunteers that assist with stocking. Ed emphasized that the fisheries staff (hatchery and field) are very committed to delivering fish efficiently to ensure the best survival.

Cormorant status on funding the program and other item, Randy Claramunt

Randy Claramunt stated that this year we were successful in obtaining a cormorant **depredation permit** for 9050 adults and 2000 nests at the colony level at six designated sites. We do not have the internal funding necessary to implement the complete program, so we have to rely on Wildlife Services. Their most effective control is at the colony level so this will be the focus. This year we are excluding other categories (fish stocking and inland water bodies) because of lack of funding. Unfortunately, if the birds are persistent, they will eventually ignore the bangers. If you reinforce with lethal means, the conditioned birds will leave. We listed sites that have conditioned birds where lethal methods would be more efficient. So, although we have the permit, without funding we do not have the ability to do it. This is the same for high priority inland lakes. Randy estimates that of the allowed number of adult cormorants to be taken, approximately 3000 of those can be handled with the USDA funding.

The **Avian Predation Predator Notification Network** of volunteers that have assisted at fish stocking sites and help monitor bird predation has been very beneficial. Some of the volunteers are starting to lose interest and commitment which is detrimental to the number of fish that get stocked. If we were to receive funding for supporting the control at the river stocking sites and priority inland locations this program would be a top priority.

The committee asked **how much funding is needed for the cormorant program**. Previously the funding allowed for \$100,000 worth of work from the USDA but to implement a full cormorant control program under the current requirements it would cost about \$250,000. The USDA funding is not guaranteed each year and can not be counted on despite DNR having a permit. The USDA must ask for their funding each year and it is not automatically included in the federal budget. Funding is needed for safety equipment, training, background checks, liability protection, etc. USDA could be utilized to do the work because they were previously set up for this but the funding must be obtained first. A hunting license and season to control the birds is not possible because the federal law does not allow it. The only allowed cormorant control is through the established permit program.

It was asked with the state working with billions of dollars **why cormorant funding was not obtained**. Randy stressed that we have undervalued our fishery to the point that our top priorities do not resonate because the perception is that stakeholders are willing to pay \$11 for a license so it must not be that valuable. Several high value fishery projects in the state cannot get funded because the state fisheries are the last of all the low priorities, rock bottom. The time to contact legislators is now but until the legislature and other officials begin to understand the tremendous economic potential of the fisheries, success is not likely. **Can the tribes assist?** Under the new permit system, the state and tribal nations must follow the same permit system, but the tribes have not figured out how to get through the process. They have asked to be added to our permit but because we do not have enough funding to meet our own needs and we have no room to add their burden to ours.

Angler Scale Sampling Program (one reliable angler per tributary) taking place within the tributaries of the Au Sable River, East Branch of the Au Gres River, and Rifle River. (Randy Terrian, and support from the US Fish and Wildlife Service).

Randy Terrian – The development of a pilot program through the Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) for use by anglers, was implemented here to establish a scale sampling program for steelhead. The FWS was interested in this program to expand their database on waterbodies that includes the Au Sable, East Branch of Au Gres, and Rifle rivers. FWS streamlined the process to be more effective and allow for the sampling to be done by anglers. If we move away from mass marking of fish, it is important to have a reliable process to show the extent hatchery fish and natural fish contribute to the fishery. This is a separate program from DNR as the Bio-techs from FWS do not have quotas like the DNR creel clerks. The FWS is looking to expand their database. **The objective of this program** is to be able to identify the hatchery steelhead from the natural recruitment steelhead through scale reading.

Acoustic Telemetry study to follow the movements of Steelhead in the Au Sable River. Mathew Klungle, DNR Fisheries Biologist; Dave Fielder, Research Biologist; and Ed Eisch, and Jeremiah Blaauw Fish Production).

Mathew Klungle introduced a pilot program involving acoustic telemetry in stocked steelhead on the Au Sable River. The purpose of this collaborative pilot project is to try to address the unknowns and concerns of what happens to hatchery fish after stocking. Factors decreasing the survival of stocked fish include avian predation, piscivore predation, water temperatures, food availability, flow rates. Related to this, Dave Fielder has a paper in review that addresses using telemetry in predator fish that evaluates the complexities of their movement to assist in determining optimal stocking windows.

For this small pilot study, the use of special predation electronic tags is used to potentially show the out-migration time, movements while within the river and out into the lake near shore. This will gather information on improving survival of stocked fish. These tags are designed with a special polymer plug which dissolves when the smolt is consumed and changes the signal of the telemetry tag which indicates the date and time when the smolt is consumed. Receivers have been deployed at many sites including bridges, near shore, and in the lake near shore. One advantage is this study is utilizing the existing telemetry infrastructure. The size of tags is limited by battery size. Because of the array of receivers in the lake, there is an opportunity to gather a lot of data during the short battery life of the device. Ten fish were used for practice and 15 fish will be used in the study. After implanting the tag, the fish will spend 8 days in captivity for monitoring, and then be released later. There are some inferences with the study including smolts that leave the receiver areas and smolts that get consumed by a bird. If a planted fish is consumed by a fish, the receiver will pick up the changed signal and should transmit useful data.

Moving forward because of the funding cycle, the next phase will be in 2025, with a goal of a significant increase in the number of fish to be tagged. The overall goal is to directly evaluate stocking events and strategies and to improve survivability of newly stocked fish.

Because the mass marking program is our basis for getting information on stocked fish, there is interest in marking all stocked fish in the Great Lakes. At the Great Lakes level, we are working with Senator Stabenow to introduce a bill for mass marking to be funded as a base operation. It is currently funded through GLRI. Chief Claramunt is also working on getting other fish species to be included in mass marking program.

Questions and Comments on agency updates that were provided in writing to everyone before the meeting. (All)

A motion was made to support changing the wording to combine splake and lake trout regulations in the Great Lakes.

Brief update on the status of the Proposed New Consent Decree that will provide the rules for managing and sharing the Great Lakes Fisheries in the 1836 Treaty Waters of Lakes Superior, Michigan, and Huron, (Frank Krist and Jim Johnson).

Frank provided a brief overview of the last few years of Consent Decree negotiations and the creation of the Coalition to Protect Michigan Resources, which is an organization representing recreational fishing groups. The Coalition feels very strongly that the resource is not being protected because of a massive expansion of both small and large mesh gill nets throughout the 1836 Treaty Great Lakes Waters. Jim Johnson summarized the Coalition's issues with Fisheries Division breaking from their own tradition of eliminating gillnets. The Proposed Consent Decree also changes lake trout, walleye, and yellow perch from mostly a by-catch species under the 2000 Consent Decree to targeted species. Gillnets are extremely efficient and non-discriminatory killing most fish caught in them. The data suggest that unless there is progress to bring mortality rates down in Lakes Huron and Michigan the fishery will not be sustainable, hurting all users of the resource. Since both lake trout and whitefish live many years and take about 10 years or more to be effective spawners, if there is a collapse of either whitefish or lake trout it could take 10-15 years or more to recover. Committee members addressed concerns that the trust is broken, that the DNR is not protecting the resource, and questioned who is accountable when the fishery crashes.

A **motion** was made for the Lake Huron Citizens Fishery Advisory Committee to oppose the expanded gill net opportunities in the Great Lakes. Motion was seconded and unanimously approved by the members. Jim and Frank were asked to write a letter representing the committee's stance which will be addressed to the Governor, Attorney General, all State representatives and senators with districts bordering the Lake Huron Treaty Waters and the NRC.

Next step for the Consent Decree negotiations is a hearing open to the public in the Federal Court in Kalamazoo on May 24-25. The Coalition to Protect Michigan Resources brought forward 10 objections that will be debated by all the parties and the Coalition. The Sault Tribe disagreed with all the other parties (Michigan, United States, 4 other Tribes) and is emphasizing that the tribes are entitled to the entire fishery if it is needed to support their members. The Sault Tribe's proposal will also be debated at this hearing.

The meeting was concluded.

Adjourned at 3:00 pm.